

Teacher Time
Early Head Start Infant/Toddler Series

Emily Adams: Hello and welcome to another edition of Teacher Time for Infant and Toddler Teachers. I'm Emily Adams.

Carol Bellamy: And I'm Carol Bellamy.

Emily: And we're so excited to be back with another fun episode, but first, we have just a little business. We want to remind you that this is one of eight Teacher Time episodes this season. Each episode will have a follow-up coffee break where we answer the questions you send in during today's show. We'll remind you throughout the show to send in questions, but you can send them in any time.

Carol: Also, when we use the term teacher, we really are referring to everyone who works with infants, toddlers, and their families in an educational environment. So, we are including family childcare providers, people who provide child care in centers who may not see themselves as teachers, but you are.

Emily: And for everyone watching, we invite you to join us on MyPeers where we are creating a community for teachers to talk to each other and share their stories, successes and questions. We hope you check it out. You'll find the link to join below. Last time we were here, we talked about using a responsive approach to curriculum. We know it's important to support children's learning by being responsive to their interests and developmental level. Today we will talk about creating a responsive learning environment for infants and toddlers.

Carol: That's right. Your curriculum likely has guidance for how to set up your learning environment. It's important to follow those guidelines as you implement curriculum, but you also want to adjust the environment to be responsive to the interests and developmental level of your children. For example, your curriculum might suggest ensuring that children have access to manipulatives, a bin with toys they can squeeze and mouth, feel and touch as they learn about the attributes of objects. If you have several infants who are teething in your classroom, you'll want to be sure to have a with lots of items that are safe for biting and chewing on, because that's what exploration of manipulatives will be all about for that group of infants.

Emily: Similarly, if you have a group of older infants who are beginning to stand up, cruise and take a few steps, you'll set up your learning environment to accommodate more space. You might even end up putting some things in storage for a short period of time to give infants safe room to move.

Carol: That's right. The Head Start Program Performance Standards have really good information about the importance of young children's learning environments. Check that section out. The standards say that environments should be responsive and foster trust and emotional security. What does that look like in your learning environment? Tell us in the chat box and we'll share your answers in a few minutes.

Emily: So, let's talk about ways that you can have an environment that really fosters trust and security. So, one thing that we want to do is ensure that the environment is really welcoming

for families. One way to do that is to create spaces for families to have their drop-off and pickup routines and rituals. You really want to make sure that your environment is accessible for all family members who might be there.

Carol: That's very true. Another thing that's important is predictability. You don't want to rearrange the environment too frequently, because children need to have consistency. Another thing that's important is routines. Our infants and toddlers spend most of their day in routines, so it's important to make spaces for those routines that are comfortable for adults and children.

Emily: Absolutely. And we want to ensure that there is space for children to have one-on-one experience with adults, but also areas where a few children can play together like in the block area and that sort of thing. So, some small group experiences.

Carol: And it's so important—take them outside.

Emily: Yes.

Carol: Children love the fresh air. They need to energize their brains, their body. And also the environment should always reflect the children and families.

Emily: That's such a good point, Carol. And now we have a video of a teacher playing in the dramatic play area with children. They're washing dishes and setting the table. Let's take a look.

[Begin Video Clip]

Teacher: Do you want to stir the food? How about we put—ooh, bacon. I like bacon. You're going to eat it straight out of the box? And some noodles. Que pasa? You want pots, or you want the bowls? Turn it on. Okay. Let's wash them. All clean. Put it on the table. Let's wash it. Turn it on. All clean. Put it on the table. Let's wash it. Turn it on. All clean. Put them on la mesa. [speaking in Spanish] Okay. [speaking in Spanish] You want to stir the food?

[End Video Clip]

Emily: I just love the play that's going on in that video. What are some of the things that you noticed going on?

Carol: I really loved how the teacher was speaking in English and in Spanish. Just culturally welcoming in that environment. Very easy.

Emily: Yes. It was nice. I like the way the dramatic play area was set up. The children could really play there. But also it's important to note that's part of implementing the curriculum in sort of what you have available to play. But I also noticed that she really let the children lead the play there.

Carol: Yes. She did. Also the environment supports children's play. They had the kid-sized tables and toys. Just very appropriate. It gives the children opportunities to have real-pretend play—practice the things that they see every day, like setting the table.

Emily: Right. Kids want to do real things. That was really nice. Let's find out what you're doing to create learning environments that foster trust and security. We have a few chat answers. You can still send them in. We have Genevieve here who says, "Create your learning environment so the children will feel safe and comfortable. Bring or put materials that are familiar to them, like pictures of them and their family. It really sets the tone for their learning. And to really pay attention to the children's needs."

Carol: I have a chat response from Califia. She says, "It's all about building a nurturing relationship with the child and his or her family. I love it when settings are responsive to the child's natural environment, including family photos, homemade books that display the child's engagement at the center with peers, props in learning centers that capture the children's interest, visual cues, soft cozy spaces that allow the child to destress and welcoming areas for parents to connect and effectively engage with the children upon greetings and departures."

Emily: That's so thorough. Really nice. And we have one more chat answer from Martha, who really talks a lot about what we've been talking about already, which is having predictable routines and safe spaces. So, I think it sounds like we have some similar ideas and we'll be exploring some more.

Carol: Thanks so much for sharing your wonderful ways you are supporting trust and security for young children. Now we have our language and literacy expert, Carrie Germeroth, from the National Center on Child Development, Teaching, and Learning to talk about how to create a language-rich environment. Welcome, Carrie. So nice to see you.

Carrie Germeroth: Hi. It's great to be back. And I am excited to be here to talk about how a really rich environment can promote early literacy and language. To start that conversation, I'd like to watch some videos that will really illustrate this for us. Pay attention to how the teachers are very responsive and let the children take the lead. So, let's watch the videos.

[begin video clip]

Teacher: Over three. What is it? You see the mermaid and the fish? You are rocking and rolling.

Student: Yes.

Teacher: Yes. Look at this one. Baby, I like yellow. Saw a starfish and fish. You're reaching so hard. You're reaching for it. You're almost there. See the fish? Are you going to kiss the fish? Let's turn the page. You don't want to sit down. You just want to stand up. Those bouncy legs. Let's see. Sit and [inaudible 09:07] with that?

Teacher: Come up here. I don't want nobody to fall over. You're right. That is the letter S. That's just fine. What else do you see? Those are called scissors. Remember when we cut our paper? We use scissors. That's the letter S. You're going to put it here in the box [inaudible 09:35]. Right.

Student: One.

Teacher: That is the number one. Awesome. Wow. You know your numbers.

Student: [Inaudible]

Teacher: Letter G. Yes. What number is this one? Number? Number seven. You're right. And what are those? Those are glasses. Yes.

[End of Video Clips]

Carol: Notice how the teachers tie the pictures on the blocks and in the books to real-life objects. In the chat box tell us how you use pictures in your learning environment to support language and literacy development. So, Carrie, tell us about the video. What can you tell us about the video?

Carrie: Just like you said, I love how both of these teachers are connecting symbols, whether they're symbols in a picture book with the baby or on a block, as the case with the little boy, to their meaning by providing the vocabulary or connecting it to a personal, meaningful experience. Both teachers are very responsive as well. The baby starts out on her tummy. She has access to the book. I love how it unfolds on the ground in front of her so she can be laid flat. When the baby starts to get a little frustrated, the teacher picks her up and helps her to sit so that she can interact with the book from a different position that might be more comfortable to her. She picks up on the baby's cues and introduces novel words that the baby may be babbling about or seems excited or really interested in. She's really matching that affect with the baby. I loved it with the little boy how, when he brought over the block and pointed to the scissors, the teacher expanded on that. She said, "Yes. Scissors, just like we use to cut." So, again, connected that symbol with something that's very personally meaningful with the child.

Carol: The teacher was really wonderful in her response. You can tell she understands how to support language and literacy development. Carrie, tell us a little bit more about supporting infants and toddlers emerging language and literacy skill.

Carrie: Sure. There are a number of things that you can do, or set up the environment to support this. Having a print and lots of different forms certainly is one of those, and that will encourage children to use print later on and prepare them for reading. Print can be lots of things. It can certainly be books, but it can also be labels on toy bins that the children are using. It can be their names on their cubby. It can be blocks, like we just saw, that have pictures or letters or numbers on them. For toddlers maybe it can be an alphabet puzzle that they can interact with the letters, or putting the posters up of the alphabet at eye level in the room as well and making sure you have those conversations around those different symbols so that children can connect their meaning with what they are actually seeing. That's certainly one way, but also setting up a library in your room, so having small shelves that are easily accessible, or baskets where the books can be easily displayed and their cover is facing out so a child can choose based on what they see on the cover, and making sure that those books have pictures that look them as well. Then having a really soft, cozy book nook area. We know that if children are comfortable reading and they enjoy it, they're more likely to do it. We don't want to forget writing. Writing is an important component of literacy and language. So, having materials like thick crayons, chalk, washable paint or washable markers are great so that children can have

opportunities to practice putting their own marks on paper and having that conversation again to connect it with meaning.

Carol: That's a really good point and really interesting. I know you also brought some pictures to illustrate what you're talking about.

Carrie: Yes. I did. These two classrooms certainly aren't exhaustive of everything you could do, but this first classroom present several different cozy and quiet soft spaces where the child might be able to read by themselves or with their friend or with the teacher. I love how the artwork is displayed on the wall. Clearly they have access to writing materials and conversations about symbols are happening. Some of the toy bins are labeled. Their books are facing out and easily accessible. In this next classroom the same thing: we've got some nice quiet soft spaces for reading. We have books that are easily accessible. Children's print is all over the wall in this classroom. And there is lots of nice functional print around the dramatic play area. So, both of these classrooms present some really nice options.

Carol: That's wonderful. What exactly is appropriate environmental print?

Carrie: We don't have to label everything. We want children to understand that print is for a purpose and it conveys a meaning and it's functional. So, making sure that they see you writing and that you're writing is for a purpose. Maybe when you're writing a note home to mom and dad, or about their day and explain and talk to the child about what it is you're writing so they can see that it's for a purpose. Being really intentional about the different bins that you might be labeling. If we label everything, it becomes like wallpaper and children don't pay attention. A baby and toddler's world is full of symbols. It's our job to help them understand what those symbols mean. So, being really purposeful and intentional about what you do label is important.

Carol: That's great information. Thank you so much, Carrie. That was really great information Carrie shared with us. Now let's see what you had to say.

Emily: This is great we do have Ashley, who shared that she has pictures on the shelves of what belongs on the shelves, and so that really helps children figure out where things go and what to put away.

Carol: Yes. I have another chat response. We have pictures of the children's families. Children love to go and look at them and talk about them with their friends.

Emily: That is so nice. We have time for just one more answer, which is we use contact paper to put pictures and posters on the floor, which is fantastic, because then those newly mobile, crawling babies have something they can crawl over to. I love that. Thank you so much for answering the chat question. Now we're joined by Alissa Mwenelupembe, a consultant for early childhood programs. Welcome back, Alissa. Thank you so much for coming.

Alissa Mwenelupembe: Thanks, Emily. It's so great to be here again.

Emily: Last time you were here we talked about having a responsive approach within your curriculum. This time we're talking about what it looks like to be responsive in your learning

environment.

Alissa: The environment is so key to children's success in their classroom. I think especially when we're thinking about infants and toddlers, flexible spaces are very important. If you're working in an infant and toddler classroom, you're going to have a wide variety of ages and developmental areas that children are at, and so you have to be able to have a classroom that's appropriate for the smallest infants, but also for those two years olds that are really active and engaged in their environment. So, making sure that you have a space that accommodates both of those ends of that spectrum, it also helps you to be successful in managing how you are able to approach each of those children at their different developmental levels.

Emily: What else can you think of that is a piece of that learning environment?

Alissa: I think an open-ended design and materials. Making sure that the materials that you have available for the children are appropriate for those children in your classroom. You spoke at the beginning of the broadcast about if you have babies in your classroom, you're going to have lots of things that are appropriate for babies to put in their mouths. So, you have to have those things for the infants, but if you have older children, they're going to need things that are more complex. So, having lots of varied materials available that can grow with children or that can be repurposed in different ways for wherever those children are in that developmental continuum.

Emily: Wonderful. Tell me a little bit about how the environment can be reflective of children in the environment.

Alissa: We really want to make sure that children see themselves in their classroom. We know this is a place where children spend a lot of their time. We want to make sure that they know that this is a place for them. Photos of children and their families are definitely important, but also having materials that are diverse, just like the children are diverse, so books, pictures on the walls, baby dolls that are all reflective of the children that are in your care. Also the community that you live and work in, and really making sure that families feel that they see themselves when they walk into your classroom.

Emily: That's so important. I feel like under the foundation of all of this is really having adults who are capable of supporting of all of this at the same time, and yet having these really responsive interactions within this environment.

Alissa: We know the foundation of all early education is relationships. So, when we have adults that are working with children that care deeply and have those responsive, caring interactions with children, and make sure that their environments are set up to support those children, all of those things are going to come together for a high-quality environment.

Emily: Wonderful. I like the way you put that all together. We actually have a video now that puts a lot of this all together where we have a teacher who is with kids who are young infants, a more mobile almost toddler and then a toddler. She really makes this environment work for all of them. Let's watch this video.

[Begin Video Clip]

Teacher: He's tired. There you go. Is that better? I think like four. There you go. Can you see yourself? Huh? Can you see yourself? There you go. What are you doing? Are you doing tummy time too? Huh? Is it time to rest? Do you want me to read that book to you? Are you going to eat it? Oh, I thank you so much. So, a grasshopper and a bug. Like a bug like this. Look. There's a grasshopper like that. Oops. It's a spider and a caterpillar and a snail and a slug. Oh, my goodness gracious. Are we not liking that right now? Huh? No?

Teacher: Are you lying on the pillow too?

Teacher: Are we all down? You're just really, really, really fussy today. Oh, no. Oh, no.

[End Video Clip]

Emily: Sometimes when we show a video there's so much going on in this really short moment. Can you talk about some of the things that you see?

Alissa: I think the thing that really sticks out for me is that that teacher is in a classroom with three children that are at three different developmental levels, but she's able to meet the needs of each one of those children in whatever way that they need that. And also I think her environment is set up to make that work. I think that it's really important for teachers to be able to have the flexibility in their space to meet those needs. In that classroom you saw that there was the boppy on the floor that was able to support that infant, and then other little toddler-aged girl was there and interacting in parallel play with that baby. Then the toddler had all those materials that were available for him to explore in the way that he was ready to do.

Emily: She did a really great job responding to each of the children's needs. What are some of the other things that you see in that really rich video?

Alissa: I love the fact that the infants and toddlers were able to interact with each other and learn from each other. We know that when infants are able to be with toddlers, they get to see all the things that those toddlers are doing and learn so much. Toddlers learn that empathy in connecting with the smaller children. That's really important.

Emily: They do. They want to take care of the babies too.

Alissa: Definitely. There was great communication. That teacher interacted verbally with all three children. I loved how she was arranging the infants to get him a toy to look at. She noticed that the little girl next to him wanted to try out what tummy time looked like for her. She commented on that. Then asking the little boy with the book, "Do you want to eat that or do you want to read it?" Anything is possible here.

Emily: That's a great option. And then when that baby got fussy, she was just right there ready to help him in that really responsive way.

Alissa: Yes. I think being able to have all those children there together, the environment supported each one of them where they were developmentally, but she was able to be there very close to address their needs.

Emily: Yes. It was really what you said: that flexible space, flexible environment, but then it's a really talented teacher who is able to bring it all together and support that.

Alissa: Definitely. I think those responsive environments are directly related to offering that responsive approach.

Emily: Absolutely. Alissa, thank you so much. What a pleasure to get to talk to you again. I really appreciate that.

Alissa: Thank you.

Emily: And remember, if you have any questions about creating a responsive learning environment, please send them in and Alissa will respond to your questions during our coffee break. The coffee break episode will be posted and available on the MyPeers group in two weeks.

Carol: Now we have one of my favorite segments here on teacher time. We get to hear from teachers. This teacher tells us that in order to set up your environment and decide when to make changes and adaptations, you really need to observe children and understand their families. As you notice their interests and developmental levels change, you can make appropriate changes to your learning environment. This happens to be a classroom teacher, but this is just as true for family child care providers. Let's take a look.

[Begin Video Clip]

Emily: When you are working with infants to toddlers, I know there is a lot around the environment that you need to change to meet the interests that the children have at the moment. Can you tell me how you figure out what they're interested in and how to set up the classroom so that you're really meeting those interests?

Teacher: It's really all observation. You really have to observe each and every child to really understand what they are. You have to get to know their family life. Build those relationships not with just the child, but with their families as well so you understand what they're interested in outside of here as well as while they're here. Having those personal relationships is big as well so then when you see what their interests and their abilities are, then you can bring in materials to help support that and help them build and scaffold upon their learning. So, it's a constant observation, and if something is not working, you put it away and you bring something out. It's kind of just guessing to see if they're interested. But you also have to introduce them to new stuff, because they're really not going to know all their interests until they see a wide variety of materials.

Emily: So, sometimes bringing things in just to kind of see what happens?

Teacher: Kind of experimental. "Here is something new. What can we do with it this time?"

[End of Video]

Emily: One thing I noticed that teacher really talk about is really stepping back and taking a moment to observe what's working in this environment, what's not working in this environment for children, and then being able to reflect and thing, "What can we do to make this environment really work?"

Carol: That is so true. I love the idea also of experimenting with new materials or even occasionally new room arrangements. That's really important. It's really good stuff.

Emily: Yes. I like that too. We'd like to hear from you about your learning environments on MyPeers. You can find the link in the Viewer's Guide.

Carol: Okay. Now it's time for you to try it out. In the video we just watched, the teacher was talking about setting up the environment and adding new materials so children can experiment and try things on their own.

Emily: Your homework is to try adding one or two new materials to your indoor and/or outdoor learning environments, and then just observe how the children explore them. Please let us know on MyPeers.

Carol: Now we're going to hear from Peter Pizzolongo from the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning. Peter is going to talk about the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework and how to create a learning environment that supports children's perceptual, motor, and physical development. Let's have a look.

Peter Pizzolongo: I'm Peter Pizzolongo, Director of Training & Technical Assistance Services at the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning—NCECDTL. For this portion of Teacher Time we'll focus on ELOF: The Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five. The ELOF is a framework that represents the continuum of learning for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers what children should know and be able to do during their formative years from birth through age five. ELOF outlines and describes the skills, behaviors, and concepts that Early Head Start and Head Start programs must foster in all children, including children who are dual language learners and children with disabilities. ELOF is organized in a way that can help teachers and families understand child development and guide the ways in which we help children learn. You can learn more about ELOF by going to the ELOF pages on the ECLKC Website, the Office of Head Start's Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center. For today's topic, Creating a Responsive Environment for Young Children, this ELOF segment focus is on the domain Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development. This domain includes goals for perception; fine and gross motor development; and health, safety, and nutrition. Perception refers to children's use of their senses to gather and understand information and respond to the world around them. We know that the use of perceptual information is central to infants' and toddlers' interactions, exploration and understanding their experiences. Think about how infants and toddlers use their senses as they engage in activities that use their fine and gross motor skills: observing, handling and using objects; using depth perception to plan on how to move in an area with obstacles. Motor skills support children in fully exploring their environment and interacting with people. So, these skills support development in all domains. Children's physical wellbeing depends on a number of factors, including their knowledge and use of safe, healthy behaviors and routines. As we think about today's Teacher Time topic, let's consider how you use your environment to support the natural

learning that infants and toddlers engage in every day. We'll see a video of children engaged in a jumping activity and then talk about some of the goals and examples of the developmental progression that these children are exhibiting. Be sure to focus on how children are using perception, motor skills, and safe behaviors as they jump from the cushion blocks.

[Begin Video Clip]

Teacher: Good words. Thank you for letting them know you were jumping. You're okay. You're okay, Livvy. You're okay. Go for it. I'm watching. Whoa. Good jump. A big five. Oh, a big five. Oh, Carmen's taking it from the lower step. Whoa.

[End Video Clip]

Peter: There was a lot to see in that video. One of the ELOF goals for children from birth through 36 months is "Child demonstrates effective and efficient use of large muscles for movement and position." The developmental progression skills that children engage in as they're working toward this goal includes learning new muscle coordination and gaining control of a variety of movements, which you saw examples of in the video. And I'm sure your curriculum also includes experiences that promote children learning new concepts and skills in this domain. Reflecting on the video, did you notice other examples of goals and developmental progression for the Perceptual, Motor and Physical Development domain as children exhibited various skills? Did you notice the child with a safety concern as she prepared to jump and another child is standing in front, and she says, "Watch out." Another child jumped and landed on his bottom, an example of a child learning to perfect his jumping skills, but not at the level of the girl who jumped before him. And I loved seeing the child who moved down to a lower step before jumping being aware of his own strengths and what he can do at this time. Knowing the developmental progression for this domain and the strengths, interests, and needs of each child in the group, teachers know how to best support children learning new concepts and practicing new skills. In the video, we saw the teacher sitting nearby, but not on top of the children. She noted what they were doing helping them to be aware of their actions, and offered words of encouragement as they jumped. Moving on to other goals in this domain, I'd like to also note that teachers take individual differences into account as well as children's cultures. In some cultures, children use utensils to eat that require a great deal of eye-hand coordination. Also, food preferences are culturally based, and some children might not want to eat foods that are considered healthy and tasty in other cultures. Children with disabilities may require adaptations or assistive technology to help them move or use their small muscles. Understanding where each child is, what her strengths, interests, and needs are begins with understanding how children grow and develop. The ELOF is a tool for teachers to use to help with that understanding. I hope that this segment has helped you to better understand the Early Learning Outcomes Framework and you recognize how the ELOF can help you to be a better caregiver.

Carol: Thank you so much, Peter. I love the video of the children jumping. Those foam blocks really offer an opportunity to tailor the learning environment to be responsive to where children are developmentally. They can jump, roll, crawl, and climb with those.

Emily: That was great. I love how careful that little girl was about making sure her friend didn't get hurt. She understood her body enough to know that she was jumping and it could hurt him,

but really overestimated how far she could jump. That's such important learning. Now we are moving on to talk about how the learning environment can really support relationships. We have Amy Hunter back with us from the National Center on Health and Wellness for our relationship-building minute. Amy, welcome.

Amy Hunter: It's so great to be here with you.

Emily: Thank you so much for coming back. Before we get started talking, I want to share a video where we have a teacher who is talking about a situation where she had an environment that was causing a lot of challenging behavior. She was able to step back and make a plan and figure out how to adjust the room to work better for the children and the adults. Let's watch that video.

[Begin Video Clip]

Teacher: The classroom used to be kind of wide open. The furniture wasn't all where you saw it placed today. The usage is to kind of run laps. For classroom management and safety we decided to play with the furniture a little bit and put it in the middle of the classroom in different spots and angles that will be comfortable and good for all of us. We try to keep everything accessible to the children, because anything in that room they're able to go for at any point of the day. We do focus on certain things, like in our lesson plans, but if they're not interested in it and they're completely going another route, we just follow—"Okay. Is that what you want to do today? All right. We'll go right on with you," and then we'll keep it going from there.

[End Video Clip]

Emily: That teacher was so good about coming up with some strategies to figure out what she could do to make then environment work for this group of children. What ideas and strategies can our viewers take away from this for their own spaces?

Amy: The first thing I just want to notice about that video that I so appreciate is how reflective she was. Right? That was what just struck me as the first thing. She was really reflective of, "I have this concern of the children running in my space, which could be unsafe, and let me think about that. let me step back and problem solve. What can I do to change the environment to make those behaviors be reduced, or to have a more appropriate environment for them to feel safe, to be safe and for us all to have better relationships in that space?"

Emily: That's so wonderful. That reflection is incredibly valuable in teaching practice, but it also takes a lot of time and sometimes needs to be supported. Something to remember is that it's helpful to have somebody to reflect with as well sometimes.

Amy: There were a number of other things I noticed about that video. The first thing is the environment of yes. I know you guys have been talking about that: the idea that everything in that classroom is open to the children. Basically there isn't anything in there that they can't do or explore. So, you can imagine how that cuts down on power struggles. It cuts down on her having to say, "No, don't, stop," which we really want to avoid. You want to have the teacher there as the facilitator of relationships, a facilitator or exploration. The environment of yes,

everything is yours here to explore really facilitates that.

Emily: I just want to point out that in the Viewer's Guide we have a few resources that will talk about how to notice if you're saying no all the time to think about ways to look at your environment and create that environment of yes where children are allowed to do whatever they can do.

Amy: When she is not in the position of being a policewoman or a monitor of the environment, she can really spend time in relationship with the children.

Emily: That's what we want.

Amy: Following their lead. What are they interested in. Really sitting down with them being present, because her mind isn't worrying about they're going to hurt themselves or get into something that they shouldn't. She can really be with them right there in the moment.

Emily: That's wonderful. Again, we have this theme of one of the most important things in the learning environment is these relationships with the adults as well. One of the things that we talk about a lot is room arrangement, materials and that sort of thing, but this theme that I think we have seen throughout today's episode of the adults and their relationships with the children are really some of the most important parts of any environment. We know that, and yet I think it's also extremely helpful to have some visual ideas and some really specific strategies about what it can look like to have various aspects of the environment that are really responsive. I know you brought some pictures that we're going to take a look at.

Amy: The physical environment can facilitate that piece that you said is the most important: the relationships. This first picture I love, because it really reflects something you all have been talking about around bringing in culturally responsive practices and welcoming all families and making that connection between home and the program environment. I think you can all see this well. The families were asked to make posters. It includes pictures from home. It includes things that are important to them. This creates a culturally responsive environment where families can feel connected to the program and bring a piece of themselves into the program.

Emily: It's so valuable to have the actual families and the community that you're in is so important over and above things that you could buy and posters you can put up. This really means a lot to the children. I've seen in classrooms where sometimes when children get upset, they will go to those photos of their families, or they will carry them around sometimes. It's really helpful for them.

Amy: Another strategy that I have seen to facilitate this kind of thing is I've heard some programs give the disposable cameras to families so that they can take pictures of their family. They can take pictures of their environment, of their pet—all of those kinds of things that they can then bring into the classroom to post so that the children can see that connection. When they are feeling like they are missing home, they can see those pictures right there.

Emily: That's wonderful. There are so many wonderful benefits to this simple strategy. We have another picture here.

Amy: We do. I love all these pictures.

Emily: Don't you want to go sit down in a rocking chair and hold a baby there?

Amy: I think that feeling that you're bringing up is really important. You look at this environment, and you think, "I would want to be in that." Right?

Emily: Yes. I do.

Amy: Yes. Let's point out a few things about the environment. One is the adult-sized rocking chairs so that adults can be comfortable as they hold babies. The other thing I would notice about this picture in particular is the subdued colors. It makes me think that we all love going to spa. One of the things as we walk into the spa is it's really calm and subdued, and it helps us feel calm, secure, comfortable and relaxed. In this space where the colors are subdued, it's the children that stand out. It's the relationships. It's the people in the environment. It's not the distraction of all the overwhelming colors. But there are many things about this environment that are really special: the area of the couch for the children and the child-size furniture.

Emily: I love the little child-size side table on the couch too. You can maybe see a sippy cup hanging out there while they flip through a book.

Amy: This feels like a home.

Emily: It does.

Amy: It's really sending the message to the children, "This is your home." And it is. It's their home away from home. It's helping children and families feel like this is a family here. Relationships are just like a home relationship.

Emily: I want to point one more thing out about this picture. I notice that there is a sweet little cozy area too. You were saying that sometimes kids spend a lot of time in the classroom, and this offers a space where they can feel like they're kind of by themselves, but there is no problem with supervision.

Amy: That's really important that young children have a space to go and either be with a small number of children—maybe one other friend or maybe two friends—or by themselves. They're with children in many programs for many hours, and so having that space where they can decompress and be alone.

Emily: That is really helpful. I actually think one of our chat people said like a place where children can go and relax is really valuable in her classroom too. We have this other fabulous picture. It's so beautiful.

Amy: Lots of things to point out about this picture. One is the slide and the stairs. We like to talk about that children at this age love to climb. You want to give them that space to climb.

Emily: Right. They're going to climb either way, so better to have something that they can climb.

Amy: What's nice about this particular piece of furniture is that more than one child. There is no waiting. Two children can go together. They can slide together, and that facilitates relationships.

Emily: It does.

Amy: We can see that they can spend time together doing that activity together.

Emily: Toddlers don't really like to wait.

Amy: Have you noticed?

Emily: I have noticed that. Yes.

Amy: A couple of other things to point out about this, don't you love the windows?

Emily: It's so nice. I just imagine the interactions that can happen peeking through that window.

Amy: Right. And we talk about relationships, those arrivals and departures and how this window facilitates the coming and going as well as relationships with the outside world. You can imagine a couple of children sitting in the pillow area just looking out and learning about the world.

Emily: Absolutely. We have one more picture. I love this photo.

Amy: I was fortunate enough to be there when this was taking place. Some things to point out here is the teacher is on the ground with the children, yet she has a back support. She's comfortable, which facilitates her to focus on exactly what she should be focusing on, which is the relationship there with the children.

Emily: Yes. I love that. They're sitting on the floor. I like that this tub is on the floor where the children can reach it. We know kids are going to be at all sorts of levels of physical development, so they're not going to have to be worrying about their ability to stand or even sit up, because she's there to support children so they can go ahead and play without worrying about some of that muscle control.

Amy: And play they did. They were in there. They're putting all of those things in their mouth. They were feeling all of the different textures. Those teachers absolutely supported that exploration.

Emily: It looks like the teachers were having a really good time too. That's really nice. So, we have another photo here.

Amy: I believe this is our last one. It may be hard to see, but in the back wall it's a window into the next classroom. If you think about children and facilitating relationships with other peers or other caregivers in the room next door, they don't leave; they're just next door. They can see them through that window.

Emily: That's so nice, because I've heard stories from parents about their child moving up to the next classroom, and it could be really distressing to leave that teacher they love.

Amy: They're seeing that same caregiver right there on the other side of the wall. On this picture you see the stairs. The same thing: they can climb those stairs as many times as they like.

Emily: When kids are right at that age and all they want to do is practice going up and down the stairs, so that's a really nice opportunity for them to be able to do that. We saw some great photos, we had a great video and conversation. It's beautiful. I know there are going to be ideas that people can take back to their program. Once, again, I find myself feeling like we are asking so much of teachers and the adults who are working with young children and their families. That moves us nicely to the resiliency and wellness conversation that we like to have where we talk about how we support the staff. Since this is about environments, what kinds of things can we think about to create an environment of wellness for staff?

Amy: That's such an important question. We've been spending a lot of time focusing on staff wellness. The staff has so appreciated that. One of the things I think about is the very first time the staff member walks through the door in the morning, what is that environment like for the staff member? When they walk through the door in the morning, are they greeted with a friendly face to say, "Hey. Good morning. How are you?" and really mean it.

Emily: I think about that for children and families how important it is that we greet children when they come into the classroom. Honestly, I hadn't really thought about how important that might feel for the staff.

Amy: I think it's critical to think about the environment for staff so that they can bring their very best self to the environment to build those relationships with children and families. Thinking about the mental health climate or the social-emotional climate that supports adults in that space—the staff. What is like for them to walk in the door? How do they feel supported? What kinds of things are taking place to build relationships among administrators and staff? We know that no matter how positive the environment might be in terms of a great workplace, there are also going to be conflicts. It's just human nature. There will be some conflicts. And so how are conflicts talked about? How are they managed? How are they surfaced? How do we talk about when we're having a hard time? I think that's also critical.

Emily: Yes. So, having some really supportive strategies in place where people can think about and manage when there are issues between people, because it will happen even in the best work environment.

Amy: What about when staff feel insecure or when staff feel like they've maybe made a mistake or maybe they don't know what to do? Who do they talk to? Is that an environment that it's okay to say, "I am really unsure about how to manage this situation or how to work with this particular child to support them, or how to build a relationship with this family." Is that insecurity or not knowing fostered in the environment so that it's okay and it's a learning environment?

Emily: I was just thinking that that ability to self-reflect and think like, “I don’t know if I’m really doing the right thing here,” is such an opportunity for growth. It is really a space where people are supported in their own learning about their own practice.

Amy: Yes. There are also some really practical things that can be done. We have actually heard many of these strategies from programs themselves. There was a director that shared with me what I thought was a phenomenal idea. He actually encouraged his staff to take a well day, to call in well. It sounds kind of amazing, but his thinking was, “Don’t wait until you’re sick. Don’t wait until you’re burned out. If you need a day to go and recharge and play so that you can come back and bring your best self to working with children and families, do it.”

Emily: What a message about the importance of who you are when you show up at work. That’s really nice.

Amy: Absolutely. And that balance that you aren’t just a worker here; you are a person with a family, with relationships at home and do what you need to do so that you can be your best self.

Emily: Absolutely. Thank you so much. We’ve covered so many wonderful things here. I really appreciate your coming and talking to us again both for the relationship-building minute and the resiliency and wellness minute.

Amy: Sure. I’m happy to be here. Thank you.

Emily: Well this has been another really fun episode of Teacher Time. I loved how we got to see so many videos of teachers out there doing the great work they do with infants and toddlers.

Carol: That’s true. Remember, if you have any questions, send them in through the chat box and Alissa will answer them during the next Coffee Break episode. Keep the fun and conversation going by joining us on the MyPeers Teacher Time Community. To check it out, follow the link in the Viewer’s Guide. Please fill out the evaluation. We love to hear what you think and what you would like to see.

And when you fill out the evaluation, you’ll be able to print out a certificate.

Emily: And a special thank you to all of our guests. Please join us next time when we will be talking about the importance of responsive interactions and how that fits in with every aspect of your curriculum. Remember that the learning environment where you and the children spend so much time can be warm and welcoming. Make the most of the space you have.

Carol: And now our moment of learning. Enjoy some giggles.